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ABSTRACT

Studies of successful beginning readers have suggested two factors--a responsive communication environment and the awareness of reading as communication--that contribute to early success in reading. In light of this, a study was conducted to identify and differentiate high communication and low communication classrooms and to explore the relationship between classroom environment and children's perceptions of the reading process. An observer spent 15 minutes in each of 15 first grade classrooms gathering information about the environment through a 57-item checklist. Checklist scores were then used to rank the classrooms as high or low communication environments. Next, ten children from the highest and ten from the lowest scoring classrooms were interviewed using a questionnaire that measured their perceptions of the reading process. Results showed that all classrooms tended to be oriented toward a fragmented skills approach to reading instruction, and that only one classroom qualified as a high communication environment. Two children from that classroom indicated an awareness of reading as communication, while none of the children from the low communication classroom did so. A total of eleven children indicated an awareness of reading as word recognition or decoding, and three indicated that reading was a classroom procedure. The findings suggest that the communication nature of reading is not being conveyed to beginning readers. (Copies of the checklist and the questionnaire are included in the paper.) (FL)

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IS THE COMMUNICATION NATURE OF READING BEING COMMUNICATED TO BEGINNING READERS?

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IS THE COMMUNICATION NATURE OF READING BEING COMMUNICATED TO BEGINNING READERS?

Studies of the spontaneous early reader provide a profile of the child who treats written language as a natural alternative to spoken language (Torrey, 1973; Price, 1976; Forester, 1977). The successful reader tends to be the product of a responsive communication environment which provides contact with the printed word (Durkin, 1959, 1961, 1963a, 1963b, 1966, 1974; Torrey, 1973; Price, 1976; Forester, 1977; Teale, 1978). Having discovered that written language "says something", the child seems to follow a progression of steps toward cognitive clarity that leads to effective use of phonics, rules and decoding skills (Fryer, 1976; Price, 1976; Forester, 1977; Downing, 1977).

While the notion of reading as a natural language communication process has become well established in the literature (Huey, 1968; Moffett, 1968; Coxon, 1977; Ryan, 1977; Forester, 1977; Ylisto, 1977; Goodman, 1979; Hall, 1979), we frequently observe kindergarten and first grade classrooms that are devoid of any signs of written work personally developed for or by the child. In other classrooms an abundance of child centered written work is in evidence. Are these classrooms different only at the surface level or is there a real difference between the perceptions of reading held by one set of class members as compared to the other?

The purpose of this study was: 1) to identify and differentiate between high communication/low communication classroom environments; 2) to explore the relationship between classroom environment and the child's perception of the reading process.

PROCEDURE

Sample. The sample consisted of 15 randomly selected first grade classrooms and twenty first grade students from a predominantly white, middleclass, suburban school district.

Instruments. Two data gathering instruments were used for this study:
1) a checklist for the assessment of classroom environment (See Table 1);
2) a questionnaire for the assessment of students' perceptions of reading (See Table 2). The checklist was developed from ideas suggested by classroom practitioners as well as ideas presented by Moffet (1968). The questionnaire is a shortened, modified form of one used by Reid (1966).

Insert Tables 1 & 2 about here.

Method. Data was gathered by observing classroom environments and interviewing children. The investigator spent fifteen minutes in each classroom tallying observed items that were on the checklist. Classroom scores were obtained by totaling the number of tallies on each checklist. Rank ordering of scores determined the highest and lowest scores. For the purposes of this study, a total of 39-57 items was considered as a high communication classroom; a total of 1-19 items was considered as a low communication classroom.

10 children from the highest scoring classroom and 10 children from the lowest scoring classroom were interviewed using the questionnaire. Each interview took about seven minutes. The interviews were taped and typescripts were made and analyzed. Students' perceptions of the reading process were inferred from their responses to the questions.

TABLE I

CHECKLIST FOR ASSESSMENT OF CLASSROOM ENVIRONMENT

SPEAKING

- _____ TAPE RECORDERS AND MICROPHONES
- _____ RADIO STATION
- _____ TV STATION
- _____ LANGUAGE MASTER
- _____ BOOKS TO READ ALOUD
- _____ OTHER

LISTENING

- _____ TAPE RECORDER AND EAR PHONES
- _____ READ ALONG STORIES
- _____ TAPES
- _____ RECORDS
- _____ SOUND MOVIES
- _____ LANGUAGE MASTER
- _____ OTHER

READING/WRITING

- _____ TRADE BOOK COLLECTIONS
- _____ CHILDREN MADE BOOKS
- _____ CRAFT CENTERS WITH DIRECTIONS
- _____ INDIVIDUALLY DICTATED STORIES
- _____ CLASS OR GROUP DICTATED CHART STORIES

READING/WRITING (CONTINUED)

- _____ POETRY - CHARTS OR OTHER NON-COMMERCIAL FORM
- _____ CLOZE PROCEDURE CHARTS OR WORKSHEETS
- _____ NEWSPAPERS
- _____ SURVIVAL READING MATERIAL: SIGNS, LABELS, MENUS, ETC.
- _____ WHOLE LANGUAGE READING GAMES
- _____ CLASS COLLECTION BOOKS (POEMS, NEWSPAPER CLIPPINGS, JOKES, ETC)
- _____ LETTERS AND NOTES FROM PEOPLE OUTSIDE THE CLASS
- _____ ANNOUNCEMENTS
- _____ POSTERS
- _____ JOURNALS
- _____ STUDENT MADE PICTURE DICTIONARIES
- _____ FILMSTRIP CENTER
- _____ WRITING CENTER
- _____ MURALS THAT INCLUDE WRITING
- _____ BULLETIN BOARDS THAT ASK FOR PARTICIPATION
- _____ TYPEWRITER
- _____ PRINTING MATERIALS AND TOOLS
- _____ SCRAPBOOKS
- _____ POSTOFFICE CENTER
- _____ SCIENCE PROJECTS WITH CHARTS AND LABELS
- _____ MESSAGE CENTER
- _____ CHARTS OF MEANINGFUL PHRASES
- _____ WORDLESS BOOKS
- _____ OTHER

ACTING OUT

_____ SCENARY, COSTUMES

_____ PUPPETS AND PUPPET STAGE

_____ CHARTS WITH PLAY PLANNING OUTLINES

_____ SCRIPTS

_____ OTHER

COMMUNICATING THROUGH ART

_____ DIORAMAS

_____ MURALS

_____ SCULPTURE

_____ FABRIC PROJECT

_____ PICTURES WITH ACCOMPANYING STORY OR SENTENCE

_____ PHOTOGRAPHY

_____ COLLAGES

_____ OTHER

TABLE 2

READING INTERVIEW

1. When you are reading and you come to something you don't know, what do you do?
2. How does that help you?
3. Do you think that _____ is a good reader?
(teacher's name)
4. What makes your teacher a good reader?
5. If she/he did come to something she/he didn't know, what do you think he/she would do about it?
6. If you knew that someone was having trouble reading how would you help them?
7. Why do people learn to read?
8. What do people do when they read?
9. What is reading?

RESULTS

All classrooms appeared to be oriented towards a fragmented skills approach to reading instruction. In one classroom the observer tallied a total of 39 items on the checklist which placed that classroom in the high communication range. Ten classrooms fell into the low communication range (See Table 3).

Insert Table 3 about here

Two children from the high communication classrooms indicated an awareness of reading as communication. None of the children from the low communication classroom indicated an awareness of reading as communication. Eleven children indicated an awareness of reading as word recognition or decoding. Three children referred to reading as a classroom procedure; i.e. Level A. Four children gave no response; said "I don't know;" or replied: "something we learn," "something we do."

CONCLUSIONS

Results of this study indicate that classrooms tend to be oriented towards a fragmented skills (low communication) approach to reading instruction. Children from classroom environments oriented toward word recognition and decoding perceive reading as word recognition and decoding. Children's responses in this study are similar to responses obtained in earlier investigations of children's perceptions of the

TABLE 3

CLASSROOM SCORES

	Possible scores	Actual scores
upper third	39-57	39
middle third	20-38	35
		24
		22
		22
lower third	1-19	19
		16
		15
		14
		13
		12
		12
		10
		10
		9

reading process (Johns, 1971; 1972; 1974; 1977; Johns and Ellis, 1976; Tovey, 1976). With the exception of two children from the high communication classroom who indicated an awareness of reading as communication, the most meaningful responses described reading as decoding.

Since children from classrooms oriented towards word recognition and decoding perceive reading as word recognition and decoding and two children from the high communication classroom did indicate an awareness of reading as communication, a relationship may exist between classroom environment and the beginning readers' perception of reading. Note that the high communication classroom earned a score of 39 items with the high communication environment ranging from 39-57 items.

While this study indicates that the communication nature of reading is not being communicated to beginning readers, it would be unwise to generalize from the limits of this investigation. Additional studies are needed. Results of this study suggest further identification of high communication classrooms and investigation of the effect of classroom environment on beginning readers' perceptions of reading.

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